

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019

www.ijellh.com

Dr. Bharti Silswal

Former Research Scholar

Dept. of English, Birla Campus

HNBGU (A central University)

Srinagar, Uttarakhand, India

bhartisilswal@yahoo.in

The Touch of Indian Mythology in the Play *Measure for Measure* by William
Shakespeare

Abstract: The present paper tries to establish a common thread between the play *Measure for Measure* by William Shakespeare and the Indian Mythology. It is quite interesting to find out the link between Indian mythological narration and Shakespeare's play, whose origin lies in *Hecatomithi*, a collection of prose tales by Giraldi Cinthio and Whetstone's story *Promos and Cassandra*.

Key words: Dark comedy, tragi-comedy, myth criticism, collective consciousness, collective unconsciousness.

Measure for Measure is a dark comedy by William Shakespeare (1564-1616) along with *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Troilus and Cressida*. It is also termed as tragi-comedy—a play in which the action passes through a series of tragic situation but which ends in happiness. It is commonly believed that it was written in the year 1603-1604 and was published in the First Folio in 1623.

The play deals with the story of a man called Angelo (the deputy of the Duke Vincentio), who was a strict puritan. Duke Vincentio, the ruler of Vienna, announces his desire to leave the city and to place Angelo as his deputy for the duration of his departure. He thinks that Angelo is the most suited person for the post. He tells Angelo that virtue is useless unless it is put into action and it is not enough merely to preserve virtue, man must increase it. Angelo has taken steps for the enforcement of the laws against fornication which had lain dormant for many years under the Duke's reign. He condemned Claudio (the lover of Juliet) to death for getting Juliet with child. The marriage contract was still on the verbal plane. However, when tested on ground, Angelo himself became the victim of lust and passion. He asks Isabella (sister of Claudio) for undue sexual favour (in return of her brother's life), but in the end everything was settled down with the help of Duke Vincentio.

Coleridge believed that *Measure for Measure* is the darkest of all the comedies of Shakespeare. However, if we notice, we shall realize that in the play all the major characters—Angelo, Isabella, Duke Vincentio, Claudio, Juliet, Mariana—are alive in the end. All the notorious affairs are set right by Duke. Claudio was pardoned; Mariana's ravished chastity is restored by her marriage to Angelo. Isabella got married to Duke. There is no harrowing spine-chilling scene in the play; even Barnardine's death is made natural by Shakespeare. So we can say that it is not the darkest comedy of Shakespeare. Critics like Arthur Quiller Couch concentrate more on the 'evil side of human beings' represented by Angelo, Lucio, Mistress Overdone and Barnardine. However, I think in the play Shakespeare gave more importance to angelic side of human beings represented by Duke Vincentio, Escalus, Mariana and Isabella.

However, the main theme of the play is justice and mercy, my focus in this paper is the hypocrisy of man. Shakespeare depicted human nature in this play: what people think themselves to be and what they really are. We can find resemblance between Angelo's misconception about his own morality and that of famous myth of Nârada Muni, a famous

Indian Sage, who also had a misconception about his own morality and celibacy. Angelo's appearance of puritanical severity does not match with his conduct; same is the case with Nârada Muni. This commonality between these two very distinct characters, one fictional other mythological, rooted in very distant culture, is very interesting thing to find out. Thus, we can find a similarity between western literature and Indian mythology.

Nârada is a Vedic sage, famous in Hindu tradition as a travelling musician and storyteller, who carries news and enlightening wisdom. He is also known as a greatest devotee of Lord Vishnu, both wise and mischievous. He is a son of Lord Brahma and Goddess Saraswati. He is one of the 12 *chiranjeevis* (immortals). Nârada is believed to be still alive and living amongst us mortals. He is considered the master of 64 *Vidyas*. A legendary figure, he is an institution in himself. Sage Sanathkumar taught *Bhuma vidya* to Nârada. This is perhaps the greatest of all the Upanishadic *Vidyas* after attaining which one does not return to mortal existence. He is the official gossipmonger. He has played the part of a divine messenger to perfection. Nârada has always been mentioned to be tirelessly wandering across the three worlds—heaven, earth and underworld; passing on information to everyone he met on his way. He stays abreast with everything going on with the human, *Devas* (Gods) and *Rakshasas* (devils). People may accuse him of causing disputes, the fact remains that his intentions were never vengeful or malicious. His ultimate goal was the betterment of every soul, living or dead, with no vested interest of his own.

The myth of Nârada Muni (saint) tells us how once he meditated to gain absolute celibacy. Fortunately, he chose the place where Lord Shiva had incinerated Kāmadeva, a Hindu god of human love or desire. Kāmadeva is a son of lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi. That is why no temptation was able to distract Nârada from his meditation. He became very arrogant. He thought he has conquered his senses and now he is equal to Lord Shiva and can defeat even

Maya, Goddess of illusion, dreams and creation, the eternal form of Shakti, one who turns the wheel of fate.

To crush his proud Lord Vishnu created a magical city and a beautiful woman called Sunderi. Nârada failed to resist these temptations; he got married to Sunderi and had many children. One day flood struck that city. Nârada found himself helpless. He does not know how to save his wife and children. He decided to go to some safe place. He held his one child on his left shoulder, another on the right, one in his left arm, another in his right. Then Lord Vishnu appeared before him and said, see my dear Nârada- it was you, who claims to be a great celibate and austere, one who had conquered lust and Maya, but these are all your children born from your union with that woman. Then Nârada realises that he was wrong in his opinion that he had conquered his senses.

In an another version of the story, narrated by swami Vivekanand in his address “Maya and Freedom” delivered in London on 22nd October 1896, once Nârada said to Krishna, ‘Lord show me Maya.’ A few days passed away and Lord Krishna took Nârada to desert. After walking for several miles, Krishna said ‘Nârada, I am thirsty; can you fetch some water for me?’ Nârada went to a nearby village to fetch water for his Lord. He entered the village and knocked at the door, which was opened by a most beautiful young girl. At the sight of her he immediately forgot that his Master was waiting for water, perhaps dying for the want of it. Enamoured by her beauty he fell in love with her and got married to her, living a very happy life. Soon became the father of many children. Then came a flood, houses, men and animals were swept away and drowned. With one hand he held his wife, and with the other two of his children, another child was on his shoulder. He tried his best to save them but all of them swept away in the current of river. A cry of despair came from Nârada, weeping and wailing in bitter lamentation. Behind him came the gentle voice, ‘My child, where is the water? You went to fetch a pitcher of water, and I am waiting for you; you have been gone for quite half an hour.’

Twelve whole years had passed through his mind, and all these scenes had happened in half an hour! And this is Maya. In *Measure for Measure*, Angelo too, considered himself as great moralist and puritan, but he found himself weak and frail in front of Isabella. He wishes to commit the same sin for which he condemned Claudio to death. Both narrations have same message that we cannot be proud of our virtues as when they are tested on ground, we are as weak and frail as others.

Measure for Measure is a compact piece of work of art. The story of the play is not original. It is founded on an event that has actually taken place in Ferrara Italy, during the Middle Ages. It has drawn its plot from the Italian works of Cinthio. In 1578, George Whetstone also wrote a play founded on Cinthio's novel—*The Right Excellent and Famous History of Promos and Cassandra*. Whetstone also wrote a prose version of the same story in his book, *The Heptameron of Civil Discourses*, published in 1582. What is so interesting here is that this story which is purely western, has remarkable resemblance with Indian mythology. The story of Nârada has been written long ago in Vedas (roughly 1700-1100 BCE) and Bhagavata Puran whose origin lies around 500 CE to 1000 CE, while *Measure for Measure* is written in the year 1603-1604 and was published in the First Folio in 1623.

It is remarkable to see the resemblance between the two. Though the story of Nârada is told in a different context, in the context of Maya. Lord Krishna wants to show him what Maya is, but somewhere we can find the similarity between Nârada's misconception of his capacity to avoid any temptation and Angelo's proud acclamation of his puritanical austerity. This shows that the claim of myth criticism is somewhat correct. At the same time, it also confirms the authenticity of 'collective consciousness.' Collective consciousness is a set of shared beliefs, ideas and moral attitudes which operate as a unifying force within society. The term was introduced in 1893 by the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim in his book *The Division of*

Labour in Society. Myth criticism interpret a text by focusing on recurring myths and archetypes in the narrative, symbols, images and character types in literary work.

In both narrations, there is a common myth- the myth of a man, who considers himself sensually immune but eventually succumbs to the temptation. It also confirms that human beings are one, despite racial, spatial and temporal differences. It also proves the authenticity of Karl G Jung's (a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst) 'collective unconsciousness.' Jung emphasises on the 'collective unconsciousness' rather than 'individual unconsciousness'. Collective unconsciousness is the repository of 'racial memories and of primordial images and patterns of experience that he calls archetypes (Ego, Shadow, Anima/Animus and Self). We can say that because of theses common myths and collective unconsciousness shared by all human beings, irrespective of their different nationality, race, culture, language and beliefs; Shakespeare, Cinthio and Whetstone were able to imagine the same pattern of story which was already there in Indian Mythology. That confirms the universality of human thought and imagination as well as its existence.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Measure for Measure*. Agra: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, 2006. Print.

WWW.google.co.in. Web. 10 Feb. 2019. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Measure_for_Measure>.

WWW.google.co.in. Web. 10 Feb. 2019. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_consciousness>.

WWW.google.co.in. Web. 10 Feb. 2019. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_unconscious>.

WWW.google.co.in. Web. 10 Feb. 2019. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archetypal literary_criticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archetypal_literary_criticism)>.

WWW.google.co.in. Web. 10 Feb. 2019. <http://www.mecheng.iisc.ernet.in/~dibakar/main/Wisepoints/Complete%20Works%20Of%20Swami%20Vivekananda/Complete%20Works/volume_2/jnanayoga/maya_and_freedom.htm>.